



*With more than 200 years of service, the US Army's NCO Corps has distinguished itself as the world's most accomplished group of military professionals. In 1989, then Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono declared the first "Year of the NCO." Twenty years later, the enlisted corps will take center stage and be recognized for its significant contributions, courage and commitment.*

*The Army's most senior leaders officially kicked off the Year of the NCO at the home of the Army's Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, on 5 January. In a letter the three had signed, Secretary of the Army Preston M. "Pete" Geren, Chief of Staff of the Army General George W. Casey Jr. and Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston announced that 2009 will be the "Year of the NCO."*

*"Today's NCO operates autonomously, and always with confidence and competence," Geren said during his address at the Association of the US Army annual meeting in October 2008, when he first unveiled the Army's plan to observe the Year of the NCO. "Our NCOs are empowered and trusted like no other NCO in the world, and most advanced armies in the world today are going to school on our model."*

*Throughout 2009, the Army will honor NCOs through initiatives and events that enhance awareness and public understanding of the roles and responsibilities of today's NCO, and enhance and accelerate NCO development through education, fitness and leadership-development initiatives. These events also will foster pride in service among NCOs and show the American public what a "national asset" it has in the NCO Corps. For more information, visit the "Year of the NCO" Web site at <http://www4.army.mil/yearofthenco/home.php>.*

# Year of the NCO:

## Pride in our Corps as the Backbone of the Army

**T**he Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines pride as, "delight or elation arising from some act, possession or relationship." *The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines pride as, "a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction that you get because you or people connected with you have done or possess something good." Today, it is very easy to take pride in being a member of one of the most elite group of individuals to walk the face of the earth—the US Army Corps of NCOs, the "Backbone of the Army."

In 1989, then Chief of Staff General Carl E. Vuono declared it the "Year of the NCO." Once again, my chest swells with pride as 2009 has been declared "The Year of the NCO" by Secretary of the Army Preston M. "Pete" Geren.

I never will forget that day in 1987, when I was laterally appointed to corpo-

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By CSM Dean J. Keveles, FA

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ral while serving as a forward observer with the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry (5-20 IN), in the Republic of Korea. I vividly recall standing in front of the mirror, staring at my new "stripes" and feeling such a sense of pride, now a member of the NCO Corps. The moment's realization was most evident when my team chief handed me a copy of the "Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer" (or NCO Creed) and told me to not only read and memorize it, but understand what every single sentence means.

**Our Creed.** The NCO Creed can be traced back to 1973, to the fourth floor of building number four at Fort Benning, Georgia. With a plain white sheet of

paper and the three letters "NCO," the first all-enlisted subcommittee at the US Army Infantry School, headed by Master Sergeant John Cato, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Jimmie Jakes and SFC Earle Brigham, is credited with producing the NCO Creed. Since its beginnings, it has been memorized and recited by thousands of NCOs during graduations, induction ceremonies and promotion ceremonies.

However, too many NCOs are comfortable with just memorizing the creed. But how many actually take the time to understand what each and every sentence in the creed means? The word *creed* means a system of beliefs and guiding principals. The NCO Creed guides us in our daily activities and gives us the moral code to follow as leaders of Soldiers. However, there are those NCOs that go beyond just following the creed.



Sergeant (SGT) Christopher Ferretti is shown after recovering a downed Shadow unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) from the Tigris River on 23 February 2006. (Photo by SGT Kenneth Sargent)

**Acts of Selfless Service.** Some NCOs perform acts of such selfless service in combat that immediate recognition is warranted. On 11 September 2006, as a junior NCO, Sergeant (SGT) Christopher M. Ferretti took charge of a patrol from Task Force (TF) 3-29 Field Artillery (FA) and two patrols from TF 1-167 (Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition), leading to 11 anti-Iraqi Force (AIF) personnel being detained. These AIF were determined to inflict casualties to Coalition Forces and damage to Coalition equipment by emplacing an improvised explosive device (IED). Ferretti detained one AIF on a motorcycle, four in a civilian car and four in an Iraqi Army vehicle, while maintaining integrity of evidence.

After discovering that one of the AIF was injured severely from the initial engagement, in accordance with established rules of engagement, he called in a 9-line medical evacuation, thus saving the man's life. This allowed the AIF to appear before an Iraqi Criminal Court for trial. Ferretti maintained his composure, calmly communicated all actions and took directions from the TF 3-29 FA tactical operations center over a very congested communications net. He continued to maintain direct communications and coordination with an air weapons team for security. SGT Ferretti was awarded an Army Commendation Medal.<sup>1</sup>

SGT Leigh Ann Hester, a military police officer in the Kentucky Army National Guard (KYARNG), became the first female Soldier awarded the Silver Star since World War II for her role in thwarting an Iraqi insurgent ambush in March 2005. In a 90-minute firefight, Hester and a handful of other ARNG Soldiers fought off more than 30 insurgents armed with assault rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades after the insurgents attacked a supply convoy southeast of Baghdad. The Americans killed 27 and wounded or captured seven others. Hester and seven other members of her unit, the 617th Military Police Company, received medals.

SFC Paul Ray Smith, the first recipient of the Medal of Honor in Iraq in 2003, made the ultimate sacrifice. He distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with an armed enemy near Baghdad International Airport, Baghdad, Iraq on 4 April 2003. On that day, Smith was engaged in the construction of a prisoner of war holding area when his TF was attacked by a company-sized enemy force.

Realizing the vulnerability of more than 100 fellow Soldiers, Smith organized a hasty defense consisting of two platoons of Soldiers, one Bradley Fighting Vehicle and three armored personnel carriers. As the fight developed, he braved hostile enemy fire to engage the enemy personally with hand grenades and antitank weapons, and organized the evacuation of three wounded Soldiers from an armored personnel carrier struck by a rocket-propelled grenade and a 60-millimeter mortar round.

Fearing the enemy would overrun their defenses, Smith, under withering enemy fire, moved to man a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a damaged armored personnel carrier. In total disregard for his own life, he maintained his exposed position to engage the attacking enemy force. During this action, he was mortally wounded. His courageous actions helped defeat the enemy attack, resulted in as many as 50 enemy soldiers killed and allowed the safe withdrawal of numerous wounded Soldiers.

These are just a few examples of the selfless acts of service that NCOs are making everyday. We can take pride in being members of such an elite corps of individuals who perform such acts in the interest of the mission and for their comrades.

**Self-development.** NCOs accomplish self-improvement through developing and increasing their knowledge. Competition among peers and oneself are a form of self-development that improves one's knowledge and demonstrates the highest qualities of leadership and professionalism.

Participating in competitions (such as Sergeant Audie Murphy and Sergeant Morales Boards or NCO of the month, quarter and/or year) causes a "fever pitch" of studying to have the confidence of knowledge to win or be selected. Every time an NCO appears before such boards, he brings his knowledge to another level. Being declared the winner of a board or being inducted into the prestigious Sergeant Audie Murphy or Sergeant Morales clubs gives an NCO pride, gives pride to his unit and significantly contributes to the development of a professional NCO Corps. Studying for such boards better educates and improves NCOs.

**Education.** Today, more and more NCOs are seeking, or have obtained, their civilian associate, bachelor's and/or master's degrees, making them more agile, adaptive and creative leaders. It



SGT Leigh Ann Hester stands in formation after receiving the Silver Star at an awards ceremony at Camp Liberty, Iraq. (Photo by SPC Jeremy D. Crisp)



Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith is photographed during the opening days of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

is *knowledge* that builds confidence in oneself, and it is confidence that exudes power. Life-long learning is continuous, and there is great pride to be had with the knowledge one gains in a center of higher learning. Opportunities are available through formal classroom learning, online college classes and even correspondence courses.

NCOs who seek to educate themselves in the NCO Education System, as well as functional courses and troop schools, bring better capabilities back to our units. The US Sergeants Major Academy was established on 1 July 1972, at Fort Bliss, Texas, and it became responsible for leadership education. One year later, on 1 July 1973, our Army went to an all-volunteer force—thus began the requirement for a more professional NCO Corps to lead a force of volunteers vice draftees. The successful completion of each level of our professional military education further develops a greater sense of pride in membership of the NCO Corps.

**Professional Publications.** Increasing knowledge through reading professional military publications is a part of the life-long learning process. One of the first publications that officially established the structure of the NCO Corps within the American Army was written by the Prussian Baron Friedrich von Steuben. During the 1777-1778 winter at Valley Forge, he laid the groundwork for the NCO Corps as it exists today with the writing of the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, commonly known as the “Blue Book.” The Blue Book set down duties and responsibilities for corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quartermaster

sergeants and sergeants major, effectively encompassing the NCO ranks of that day. The book also established the qualities a Soldier must have to serve in these demanding positions. For 30 years, the Blue Book served as the American Army’s regulatory bible.

The *NCO Journal*, a quarterly publication that made its first debut in 1991, is a professional development tool designed to provide a forum for the open exchange of ideas and information, support training, education and development of NCOs and to foster a closer bond among its members.

Branch publications of professional reading, such as *Fires* and the *Infantry Bulletins*, to name a couple, are forums in which NCOs can gain further knowledge specific to their branches.

*Field Manual 7-22.7 The Army NCO Guide* is an official Department of the Army publication that states its purpose as “providing the Army’s [NCOs] a guide for leading, supervising and caring for [S]oldiers.” While neither all-inclusive nor intended as a stand-alone document, the guide offers NCOs a ready reference for most situations.<sup>4</sup>

A civilian version, titled *NCO Guide*, is in its 8th edition and has been published continuously since 1948. It is updated frequently by highly knowledgeable and experienced senior NCOs. It has grown in reputation as a key source of professional information for NCOs, who have come to rely on its accuracy and completeness.<sup>5</sup>

Though the World Wide Web contains a wealth of information for all NCOs, NCO Net at <https://forums.bcks.army.mil> is a particular online community of practice—a professional forum for NCOs by NCOs. The US Army Combined Arms Command Battle Command Knowledge System team at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, developed and facilitates NCO Net as a virtual community where NCOs engage in professional conversations and the sharing of knowledge which becomes embedded in their professional lives. The proponent for NCO Net is the US Army Sergeants Major Academy.

**Traditions and Heritage.** Maintaining our traditions and heritage not only gives pride to our corps, but honors those deserving NCOs of past generations. We keep our traditions and heritage alive with such events as the NCO induction ceremony. The NCO induction ceremony is a celebration of the newly promoted corporals and sergeants joining the ranks of a professional NCO Corps. It emphasizes and builds on the pride we all

share as members of such an elite corps. The ceremony also serves to honor the memory of those men and women of the NCO Corps who served with pride and distinction. It is a rite of passage and allows fellow NCOs of a unit to build and develop a cohesive bond.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2004, the NCO Academy at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, has hosted an annual NCO Backbone Ball. Each spring it continues to be well-regarded in honoring the contributions of the NCO to our Army. The event culminates with a “Backbone Ceremony” in which the chevrons and meaning behind each rank in the NCO structure is proudly displayed and revered in a six-foot tall vertebrae.

Understanding the commander’s intent, it is the sergeants and staff sergeants who are getting the job done in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. As long as our NCO Corps continues to be empowered by our commissioned officers and commanders, we will remain the best NCO Corps in the world; a corps in which so many other countries attempt to emulate. Our NCO Corps is educated, prideful and exudes a power unlike any other in this world. We can be proud of such deep heritage as the “Backbone of the Army” and take great pride in being members of the same corps as SFC Paul Ray Smith and SGTs Leigh Ann Hester and Christopher Ferretti.

#### Endnotes:

1. Department of the Army Form 638 (Army Commendation), by Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Dean J. Keveles, 11 September 2006.
2. Excerpt from Citation for the Medal of Honor, available at <http://www.army.mil/medallofhoror/smith/citation/index.html>.
3. Erick Schmitt, “Female M.P. Wins Silver Star for Bravery in Iraq Firefight,” *New York Times*, 17 June 2005.
4. *Field Manual 7-22.7 The Army NCO Guide* (Washington DC: Department of the Army), 23 December 2002.
5. CSM(R) Robert Sterling Rush, *NCO Guide* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books), 2006.
6. *Op cit. FM 7-22.7*.

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